

The Gift of Wings: The Arrival of the St Michael Archangel Altarpiece in the Chapel of Provence

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The *St Michael Archangel* is a problematic painting that has for far too long been sitting uncomfortably amongst the known oeuvre of Mattia Preti (1613-1699). (Fig. 1). The painting was first mentioned in 1745 by Bernardo De Dominici in his biographical note on Preti, wherein he lists the altarpiece of the Chapel of Provence as an '*opera bellissima*' by the Hospitaller artist.¹ Although De Dominici did not mention it, the painting was known to be a copy of the famous altarpiece by Guido Reni (1575-1642) found in the Capuchin church of Santa Maria della Concezione in Rome.² (Fig. 2). Ever since De Dominici's inclusion of the chapel altarpiece with Preti's oeuvre, the painting has suffered from the relegation of its status to a mere replica of lesser importance, one which is surrounded by original masterpieces inside the Conventual church of the Order of St John in Valletta. Remaining ignored for centuries, the painting has been mentioned exclusively in terms of its relevance to Preti studies in catalogue listings of the artist's work. In

* Acknowledgements: Giovanni Bonello, Maroma Camilleri, John Critien, Cynthia de Giorgio, Stanley Fiorini, Sante Guido, John T. Spike

1 B. De Dominici, *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani*, III, 1742-45, p.364, quoted in John T. Spike, *Mattia Preti: Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings*. (Comune di Taverna, Italy, 1999), 402.

2 National Library of Malta (NLM), Libr. 1123, c. 1770, f.43, '... cioe' il quadro di S. Michele Arcangelo da lui copiato da quello di Guido Reni che esiste nella Cappella della Lingua di Provenza, il cui quadro original si trova nella chiesa dei Capuccini di Roma', quoted in Spike, 402.

2001, with the discovery of new archival documents about the arrival of the painting in Malta, the altarpiece received its first serious study by Moira Pisani, albeit in an attempt to confirm Preti's hand by relating the dates presented in the archives to the known time-line of the artist's life.³ As the subject of this essay, a second study on the altarpiece, its history and artistry are outlined and interpreted on their own merits, shorn of any obligation to maintain the attribution to Mattia Preti, which has blinded historians to the greater significance of the painting itself.

The Original Painting of St Michael the Archangel by Guido Reni

The original painting in Rome held all the glory, being admired greatly in its time,⁴ and lauded by Bellori as a masterpiece of ideal beauty by the Bolognese artist.⁵ The altar painting graced a chapel in the church commissioned in 1626 by Antonio Barberini, the Capuchin brother of Urban VIII. This was one of the many altarpieces, in the church of Santa Mariadella Concezione, which the Barberini Capuchin had commissioned from the Bolognese artists with whom he and his pontiff brother had been familiar in their youth, foremost amongst them being Guido Reni.

The figure of Saint Michael the archangel had other connections with the Barberini patrons, having been adopted as Urban VIII's patron saint at the start of his pontificate. The choice of date for the coronation of the Barberini pontiff, 29 September 1623, was the feast-day of St Michael Archangel. The saint often appeared as part of the pope's personal iconography, an *impresa*, most notably in the ceiling painting, the *Allegory of Divine Providence and Barberini Power*, executed by Pietro da Cortona in the *Salone* of the Barberini Palace in Rome. One of the chapels inside St Peter's in Rome was dedicated to

3 Moira Pisani, 'Mattia Preti's first work', *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 25 November 2001, 44-45.

4 Carlo Cesare Malvasia, Felsina Pittrice, II, 1678, quoted in Francis Haskell, *Painters and Patrons: Art and Society in Baroque Italy*. (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1980), 43.

5 Gian Pietro Bellori, *Vita – Ms 2506*, quoted in Stephen Pepper, *A New Late Work by Guido Reni for Edinburgh and His Late Manner Re-Evaluated*. In 'The Burlington Magazine', 121, no. 916 (1979), 418-25.

the protector saint and was decorated in mosaic with a composition by the Cavaliere d'Arpino in 1628.⁶ When in 1756 the mosaic was deemed to be too deteriorated to be restored, a fresh mosaic was inserted, based on Guido Reni's painting in the Capuchin church.⁷ (Fig. 3).

The *San Michele Arcangelo* was one of Guido Reni's better known paintings and many copies were made. The Bolognese biographer Giambattista Passeri commented on the '*infinità di copie*' of the *San Michele* in oils.⁸ To understand the possibility of the Malta painting even being executed during Reni's life, one need only look at the method by which the artist made the reproduction of his own work possible: the most diligent *copista* at the time was one of Reni's own students, Ercolino di Maria who produced copies of Reni's best known subjects in the Master's studio.⁹ In his 1678 biographies of Bolognese artists, Carlo Malvasia stated that Ercolino's copies were indistinguishable from Reni's originals, to the point of even confusing the Master as to which was the copy,¹⁰ the biographer Filippo Baldinucci too claimed that Ercolino was a *copiatore meraviglioso*.¹¹ He was trusted by Reni to be the courier to deliver the *San Michele Arcangelo* to Rome, and was authorized to retouch the painting if necessary, and also to produce copies if so asked.¹² According to Richard E. Spear in his 1997 biography of Reni, Ercolino is known to have executed at least one copy of the altarpiece, which was so expertly done that Urban VIII is reported to have invited the *copista* to paint a work of his own for St Peter's, an offer he declined.

6 Louise Rice, *Urban VIII, the Archangel Michael, and a Forgotten Project for the Apse Altar of St Peter's*. In *The Burlington Magazine*, 134, no. 1072 (1992), 434. The mosaic was unveiled on 29 September 1628, the anniversary of the coronation of Urban VIII.

7 F. Difederico, *The Mosaics of Saint Peter's: Decorating the New Basilica*. (University Park, PA, 1983), 74-75, quoted in Rice, *Urban VIII*, 434.

8 G.B. Passeri, *Vite de pittori, scultori ed architetti: che anno lavorato in Roma, morti dal 1641 fino al 1673*, quoted in Richard E. Spear, *The 'Divine' Guido: Religion, Sex, Money and Art in the World of Guido Reni*. (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1997), 244.

9 Ibid., 232. Ercolino di Maria was better known as Ercolino di Guido, though his alias was mistakenly believed to refer to his mentor, instead of to Guido his father.

10 C. Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, II, quoted in Spear, *The 'Divine' Guido*, 232.

11 F. Baldinucci, *Notizie dei professor del disegno da Cimabue in qua* ..., IV, quoted in Spear, *The 'Divine' Guido*, 232.

12 Spear, *The 'Divine' Guido*, 232.

The original altar painting, in Santa Maria della Concezione, has the distinction of having been executed on silk.¹³ The choice was an experiment by Reni, aimed at withstanding the ravages of time that he had observed on linen and canvas. He also aimed to slow down the process of the darkening of colour which he observed on paintings by earlier artists. Reni continued to resort to this measure in other works in the 1630s, during his final years. This distinctive element is not present in the altar-painting in the chapel of Provence, which was executed in oil on canvas.

Why should the copy be interesting?

Replicas of famous paintings are increasingly seen to provide new insights into the history of patronage and collecting, yet art historians have yet to give a second thought to this copy in the Chapel of the Hospitaller Langue of Provence in St John's. Although the relative value of replicas, as part of the history of art and patronage, is as yet inadequately studied for conclusions to be drawn, copies of masterpieces certainly enjoyed a greater role in the history of art collecting than can be imagined in today's digital age with the possibility of infinite reproductions. Copies of famous paintings from private collections were one way of establishing the supremacy of the art collector who owned the original and who could commission copies to present as gifts; conversely, famous paintings could be enjoyed in more than one collection by means of highly-accurate copies of the original masterpieces. Furthermore, commissioned copies of publicly visible paintings such as altar pieces were another means of establishing one's status as art collector as evidenced by one's connoisseurial choices.

The significance of copies in art collections can be inferred from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century inventories, where one can find records of copies of famous paintings included with the lists of original paintings: for instance, mention of copies of paintings by Mattia Preti would frequently surface in the *spogli* of those knights

¹³ Pepper, *A New Late Work*, 421.

who were the Hospitaller artist's contemporaries,¹⁴ implying that copies were commissioned directly from the artist, although they would often be executed by his pupils.¹⁵ One contemporary of Mattia Preti, Fra Giovanni Caravita, the Order's Receiver in Syracuse, appears to have followed the progress of paintings which he acquired from the master's studio, knowing that they were by Preti's assistants yet with the artist's occasional intervention: '*Quadri tredici di varie figure con cornice mezzo dorato copie del fu Sig.r Cav.r Preti fatta colla sua assistenza che si devono molto stimare*'.¹⁶ The latter comment shows that copies of Preti's paintings produced by the artist's studio were highly valued and that the acquisition of a copy was itself a privilege.

Being an excellent painting with a closely observed technique and having an equally intricate story to its origins, the *St Michael Archangel* in the chapel of Provence is one replica which rewards curiosity which ventures beyond the question of attribution: the history of the painting's installation inside the chapel sheds valuable light on to the growing field of studies on art patronage and collecting by knights of the Order of St John. Perhaps even more importantly, the painting's history also presents a compelling case for a date earlier than 1659, when the first notable baroque painting was installed inside the Conventual church. 1659 was the year of the arrival of Mattia Preti in Malta, with his large painting of *St Francis Xavier* commissioned by Grand Master Martin de Redin and the year he executed other paintings - the *St George* altarpiece and *St Firmin* – for the chapel of Castille, Portugal and Leon, transforming the

14 The documents pertaining to Fra Andrea Marciano (died 1696, Malta) contain an inventory of works of art including fifty-seven paintings, a number of which were executed by Preti, or by the artists in his studio, as copies of his works: '*... Una testa di Nro Sig.re vestito di porpora originale del Cav. Preti con cornice dorata ... Quattro quadri di palmi 9 di altezza e sei di larghezza conteneva la Visitazione, la Tentazione nel deserto, I Sig.re servito dagli Angeli dopo il digiuno di quaranta giorni e Christo risuscitato quando compare alla Madalena in forma di Ortolano, copie dell'originali del Cav. Preti / Quattro quadri di pal 6 di larghezza e pal 4½ di altezza dei Quattro Evangelisti, copie*'; NLM, Arch. 931 (32) no. 3, f. 25r.

15 D. Cutajar, *The Followers of Mattia Preti in Malta*. In '*Mid-Med Bank Ltd Report and Accounts 1988*'. (Malta, 1988); also K. Sciberras, *Mattia Preti: The Triumphant Manner*. (Malta: Midsea Books, 2012.)

16 NLM, Arch. 931 (32), no. 33, f. 282r.

chapel into a baroque theatre of piety and heroism.¹⁷ (Fig. 4). For this reason, 1659 has long been thought to demarcate the transformation of the entire Conventual church by the Hospitaller artist, *il Cavaliere Calabrese*, into a masterpiece of high Baroque art and architecture.

De-attributing the painting

Before embarking on a discussion of the altar painting, it is necessary first to clear away the dates and attribution that have shackled the painting and deprived it of the attention that it deserves. De Dominici's word carried weight with authors throughout the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century, with Maltese historians like Achille Ferris repeating the mistaken attribution in 1866.¹⁸ It was only in 1926 when doubts were first expressed by Valerio Mariani, who explained: '*Avremmo qualche dubbio sull'attribuzione a Mattia Preti della copia del celebre San Michele Arcangelo di Guido Reni, posta nella cappella di Provenza: la stessa frase del De Dominici "nella cappella dei provenzali havvi una bella copia del S. Michele del Guido" potrebbe aver l'aria d'una frase scivolata in mezzo alle note sui quadri del Preti senza alcun diritto ...*'.¹⁹ In 1955, Hannibal Scicluna published his tome on St John's church, and refrained from any mention of Preti when describing the titular as a copy after the original by Guido Reni.²⁰ The next books to discuss the painting were both published in 1999, yet presented two opposing views: Preti's involvement in the execution of the altarpiece is re-stated by Dominic Cutajar who

17 S. Guido and G. Mantella, *Mattia Preti (1613-1699): The Masterpieces in the churches of Malta*. (Malta: Miranda Publications, 2013), 36-43.

18 A. Ferris, *Descrizione storica delle Chiese di Malta e Gozo*. (Malta, ed. 1985), p.142.

19 V. Mariani, *Mattia Preti a Malta*. (Rome, 1926), 54, quoted in Spike, *Mattia Preti*, 402. De Dominici made a comparable error in his account of the history of another *San Michele Arcangelo*, though one securely attributed to Mattia Preti, which was commissioned in 1690 as an altar painting for St Paul's Collegiate church in Rabat, where it is still seen. In the case of the latter, De Dominici conflated Preti's *San Michele Arcangelo* with an older painting of the same subject transferred from another church to the Rabat parish; Spike, *Mattia Preti*, 402.

20 H. Scicluna, *The Church of St John in Valletta*. (Rome: Casa M. Danesi, 1955), 72.

described the painting as ‘... a genuine baroque re-working by Mattia Preti...’ in his book on the works of art inside St John’s church,²¹ Cutajar’s position is reiterated by Moira Pisani in 2001.²² On the other hand, John T. Spike expressed his own doubts about the attribution to Preti in his catalogue raisonnée of the Master’s paintings.²³ In 2012, Spike’s questioning stand was followed by Keith Sciberras who suggested that conservation of the painting could shed some light.²⁴

The archival documents discovered by Pisani reveal that the altar-painting of *St Michael the Archangel* is most certainly not a Maltese-period work executed by Mattia Preti. The archival information supports Spike’s stylistic and technical analysis of the painting, which bears repeating within the context of this paper’s new interpretation of the findings.²⁵ First, a stylistic reading of the painting demonstrates that the composition reveals not the slightest deviation from the original by Guido Reni, a finding which Spike remarked would make the copy at St John’s an ‘*unicum*’ in Preti’s oeuvre. Preti’s known paintings do not include replicas, while those compositions that are derived from paintings by earlier masters, such as *The Incredulity of St Thomas* (Orphan’s Asylum, mid-1670s),²⁶ and, perhaps more pertinently, the *St Michael Archangel* (St Paul’s Collegiate Church, Rabat, 1690), invariably reveal some idiosyncratic adaptation. Another factor that undermines the attribution to Mattia Preti is that the Malta *St Michael Archangel* faithfully replicates the colourism and brushwork used by Guido Reni, proving that the Malta painting was executed in direct proximity to the original, not from memory or from prints.

21 D. Cutajar, *History and Works of Art of St John’s Church, Valletta – Malta*. (Malta, M. J. Publications, 1999.) The author does not quote new sources of information on the painting.

22 See foot-note 3, above.

23 Spike, *Mattia Preti*, 402. The catalogue entry for the altar painting of the chapel of Provence is found in the chapter titled ‘Other paintings attributed to Mattia Preti’, and not with those paintings enjoying a certain attribution. Spike offered the 1670s as a tentative date for the painting if executed by Mattia Preti, but then questions this as the artist was not known to have left Malta after 1660.

24 Sciberras, *Mattia Preti*, 464. Sciberras suggests that conservation treatment of the painting would be necessary for a final assessment.

25 Spike, *Mattia Preti*, 403

26 National Museum of Fine Arts, Inv. No. 283-4.

Seven years separate Preti's departure from Rome in 1652 and the year of his first arrival in Malta in 1659. This fact undermines any attempt at explaining the accuracy of detail in the copy and suffices to complete the de-attribution. To the information provided by Spike's analysis, one may add the question as to whether Preti would even be asked, let alone accept, to produce an identical replica of another artist's famed painting, at the height of his own fame as artist-knight.

The painting as gift

Having freed the altar-painting of *St Michael Archangel* from its misleading attribution, the painting may now be considered on its own intrinsic merits. It is now known that the devotional painting was actually a private gift which, in February 1653, was presented by Fra Commendatore Orsi, a Grand Cross of the Order, to Grand Master Lascaris, for the latter's personal collection. Grand Master Lascaris received the gift of the painting in 1653, for which he thanked Orsi by means of a letter dated 28 February, found with other copies of magistral correspondence in the archives of the Order kept at the National Library of Malta.²⁷ (Fig. 5). The letter's brevity permits its transcription here in full:

Com.re Orsi a dì 28 Febraio 1653

Con la n[ost]ra l[ette]ra delli 20 d'Ottobre habbiamo ricevuto nel ritorno che fecero qua la settimana passata le tre galere spedite à Marsiglia il Quadro di S. Michele Arcangelo, che si é piacuto mandarci. É come ci é stato molto caro il riconoscere per [mezzo] di esso la n.ra amorevolezza con essendoci paruto molto bello. Habbiamo donato ancor noi voluntieri alla n.ra Ven. Lingua di Provenzia, accio, sia collocato nell'Altare della sua capella della n.ra Maggior Chiesa Conventuale di S. Gio. Ve ne diamo però le debite gratiae, et in cambio delle prosperità auguratici in congiuntura del Sto Natale con altra n.ra delli 18 di Dec.re ripreghiamo anche a noi dal Sig. Iddio ogni n.ro contento.

“[Letter to] Comm. Orsi 28 February 1653

27 NLM, Arch. 1431, *Registro delle lettere italiane spedite a varj sovrani, ambasciatori ed altri personaggi dal gran maestro Lascaris*, f. 52v. The letter was first published in Pisani, ‘Mattia Preti's first work’, 44.

Following our letter dated 20 October, last week with the return journey of three ships that were sent to Marseille, we received the painting of St Michael Archangel, which you have chosen to send to us. It was very endearing to recognize your kindness in its beauty. We have also willingly donated it to our Venerable Langue of Provence, for it to be installed on the altar of the Chapel of St Michael in our Conventual Church of St John. We extend our thanks, and exchange Christmas greetings of prosperity in response to an earlier missive dated 18 December.”²⁸

Little is known of Fra Orsi: the records of the Order mention three knights by the name, however the likeliest *commendatore* may have been Fra Alberto Orsi, a Bolognese knight who professed in 1621.²⁹ Orsi appears to have identified strongly with his Bolognese origins, in presenting to the Grand Master a copy of a masterpiece by his compatriot Guido Reni. Gift-giving in the baroque age was loaded with expectations of reciprocity, so it would not be amiss to think that Orsi may have had covert intentions when making a gift of the *St Michael Archangel* to Grand Master Lascaris. The archives of the Order hold the clue to such a reading: a few months after the arrival of the painting in Malta the deliberations of the Council of the Order include an entry dated 9 July, whereby the Council agreed to concede to Fra Alberto Orsi an extension of his absence from Malta which was due to litigation over property that the knight needed to attend to in Naples.³⁰ This concession was not the first made to the knight, who had successfully petitioned to stay away from the Convent for the previous five years.

This long period in Italy may have provided Fra Orsi with the opportunity of acquiring works of art for the purpose of building up his own art collection, amongst which one may expect the *St Michael Archangel* to have been prominently displayed, owing to its large dimensions. In identifying this particular painting as a gift to Grand

28 Author's translation.

29 Dal Pozzo, *Ruolo Generale de' Cavalieri Gerosolimitani Ricevuti nella Veneranda Lingua d'Italia* ... (Turin, 1738), 152: 'Gran Croce ad honores, Fr Alessandro Orsi, di Bologna, [professed] li 7 Giugno 1585'. Fra Giovanni Orsi who professed in 1607 but later joined the Capuchin Order, and Fra Alberto Orsi, who professed in 1621, about whom little else is known. The latter is the likeliest candidate.

30 NLM, Arch. 118, *Liber Conciliorum 1652 - 1654*, f.133: *Resid.a pro Fr.e Alberto Orsi*. See the transcription and its translation appended with this essay.

Master Lascaris, Fra Orsi made an inspired choice in selecting the devotional theme of the protector saint, though one with subtle connotations of justice and retribution, and a prudent choice in selecting a copy of an already famous painting, ensuring that its reception in Malta would not fall short of the esteem and value that Orsi would have wished his gift to elicit. With his gift of a monumental painting representing the protector saint, was Orsi indirectly attempting to sway the Grand Master in his favour? Was he seeking forgiveness for his extended absence from the Convent? Whatever the reason for Orsi's gift may have been, that reason remained unstated.

The arrival of the painting in Malta

The voyage of the three ships mentioned in the Grand Master's letter was well documented in accounts of meetings of the Council of the Order as well as in later histories of the Order.³¹ The ships had sailed from Malta heading directly to Marseille in October 1652, returning after a number of stops at the ports of Genoa, Pisa, Civitavecchia and Naples where various goods, as well as a number of galley rowers, were taken on board. Yet none of the accounts include any mention of a painting being taken on board nor was it listed in any ledger book of the time.

The painting's arrival at St John's

Lascaris accepted the gift graciously. However he too chose to make a gift of the painting instead of displaying it with the art collection inside the magistral palace; by this deed, the Grand Master divested himself of any attendant obligation to reciprocate the gift made by Orsi. Lascaris donated the large work of art to the Langue of Provence, for display inside its chapel at the Conventual church.³² The Grand

31 Dal Pozzo, I, p. 206: The departure of the ships took place in October 1652 and they returned to Malta on 19th February 1653.

32 NLM, Arch. 2087, *Registro delle Deliberazioni della Lingua di Provenza 1653-70*, f. 2r

Master's choice of the chapel of the Langue of Provence was a logical step for more than one reason: as a knight who hailed from Nice, Lascaris had belonged to the Langue of Provence and this explains the favouring of his former langue over others. Furthermore, St Michael was the patron saint of the second chapel on the right-hand side of the Conventual church, and which had been allocated to the langue in 1603, this being the first chapel to be decorated with an altarpiece.

What is less certain is whether Lascaris intended the effect that would be achieved with his introduction of the first Baroque work of art inside the Conventual church. Together with the Solomonic curved columns that embellished the altar inside this chapel since before 1645, the large brightly-hued monumental painting of *St Michael Archangel* must have made a great impact on its viewers, especially on Hospitaller knights who stood beneath the heroic figure of the sword-wielding archangel about to deal a fatal blow to the bull-like figure of Satan held down by his foot.

It would appear that the painting was delivered directly to the langue of Provence because by 7th March 1653, the Council of the langue was informed of the Grand Master's gift. An entry in the deliberations giving an account of the meeting of that day states that '*... Comm.eur Fra Denis de Polastron [...] ont dit que [...] leur a fait consigner un tableau de la figure de St Michel Arcange peint a l'huile que [...] fait a Rome, quelle donne est faite present [...] v. Langue pour le mettre en la chapelle di S. Michel dans la grande eglise de St Jean le quel image et portrait.*'³³ A later entry of the same meeting mentions that the painting was to be cherished and presented for the embellishment of the chapel and the honour of the langue. Another entry, annotated with the words '*Ordinance pour faire metre le tableau a la Chapelle St Michel donnée par S.Em. Lascaris*' gave the information that Fra Jean-Jacques de Verdellin, the procurator of the langue, had by then installed the painting in the chapel.³⁴

33 Ibid. Translation: Commendatore Fra Denis de Polastron ... said that a delivery has been made of an oil painting of the figure of St Michael Archangel done in Rome, which gift was made to the Venerable Langue to place it in the chapel of St Michael in the church of St John, with a picture of the portrait [of the saint].

34 Ibid., ff. 2v-3v. The latter entry states '*...qu'il fait monter le tableau que S. Em. a donne pour la chapelle de St. Michel.*'

The first Baroque painting inside St John's

Lascaris's gift of the magnificent Baroque altar painting to his langue's chapel was followed by a similar gift made by his successor De Redin to the chapel of the latter's langue. In 1656, when still the Prior of the langue of Aragon, Martin de Redin acted to set in motion the embellishment of his langue's chapel. De Redin set off the chain of events which brought Mattia Preti to Malta in 1659 starting with the painting of *St Francis Xavier* which had been commissioned by the Aragonese knight. Was Preti's breath-taking masterpiece of *St George and the Dragon* – another depiction of a protector saint vanquishing evil – an attempt at surpassing the masterly composition of the *St Michael Archangel*?³⁵

Inevitably, the brilliance of the baroque ensemble into which St John's was transformed, has made it very difficult to picture what the Conventual church originally looked like before the middle of the seventeenth century. The paintings which used to grace the altars of the side chapels in the first half of that century are still to be seen inside the sacristy and the museum and they present an uneven range in quality of religious art, ranging from the late Renaissance sensibilities of Matteo Perez d'Aleccio's *Baptism of Christ* and Stefano Pieri's *Flagellation* to the gauchely Mannerist composition of Francesco Potenzano's *St George and the Dragon*. However, there is no sign of the old *St Michael* that originally graced the first altar of the chapel.³⁶

Newly discovered archival sources reveals that in that same year, 1653, the old altarpiece was moved from the chapel of Provence to the sacristy, after its displacement by the arrival of the Orsi *St Michael Archangel*. A request for the old painting had been made to the langue of Provence by Fra Bartelemy Ducros, sacristan of the church, and was considered by the langue only a few weeks after the installation of the new altar painting. An entry in the council deliberations,

35 The extraordinary history of the paintings which Preti went on to execute for the Chapel of Aragon and which led to his transformation of the entire Conventual church has been well documented. Most recently, Guido and Mantella, *Mattia Preti*, 2013.

36 Scicluna, *The Church of St John*, 71. The author did not give any reference to his source.

annotated with the words '*Deliberation tableau vieux de la Capelle a' S. Jean*', describes the discussion that ensued, with the outcome that permission was granted for the transfer of the painting and its frame to the sacristy on condition that it would never be removed and that it would remain in the ownership of the langue.³⁷ Although the *tableau vieux de S.n Michel* is no longer to be seen inside the sacristy, it is worth noting the significance of the sacristan's request. That the painting was deemed worthy enough to be asked for display in the Sacristy suggests that it was still in a good state of preservation and could therefore continue to serve as an object of spiritual devotion.

The start of the Conventual Church's art collection

Perhaps more significantly, the Langue's acceding to the sacristan's request set off another train of events whereby other former altarpieces were also moved to the Sacristy. This signalled the start of the Conventual church's own art collection, which is today conserved and displayed inside the Co-Cathedral's museum. Amongst the former altar paintings, now in the Museum of St John's Co-Cathedral, one will find the *Martyrdom of St Catherine* by Francesco Potenzano, formerly in the Chapel of Italy, as well as the *St George killing the Dragon*, by the same artist, formerly in the Chapel of Aragon, and *The Baptism of Christ*, by Matteo Perez d'Aleccio, formerly the High Altar painting.

To sum up, in 1653, Orsi's gift of the *St Michael Archangel* painting gave wing to the Baroque aesthetic, which was to soar so majestically inside St John's Conventual church only a few years later. It also set off the start of the art collection that is now seen in the Co-cathedral's museum. Little could the Bolognese Hospitaller knight have imagined that his gift of one painting was to lead to the monumental transformation

37 NLM, Arch. 2087, f. 8v: '*En la meme langue, Fra Bartelemi' Ducros Sacristain de la grande eglise de Sn Jean a repri[...] en y celle qu'il plaise de lui [...] de pouvoir mettre a la sacristie le vieux tableau et cornice de Sn Michel pour l'ornement de la d[it]*' Sacristie cequantande par les Seign.re de ce d' langue fut delibere' qu'il soit permis au d' fr sacristain de metre le tableau et cornice [...] a condition qu'on ne le puisse jamais [...] de la d' Sacristie et qu'il sois toujours a la dispos.n de la d' langue qui son reserve toujours la propriete' ...'

of the Conventual church into the jewel of High Baroque art and architecture which continues to draw so many admiring visitors today.

Appendix

NLM, Arch. 118, Liber Conciliorum 1652 - 1654, f.133

Resid.a pro Fre Alberto Orsi

Die Eadem instanti fre' Fabritio Cagliola nomine et pro parte Com. ris fratris Alberti Orsi euis principalis, liquidari pro residentia Conventuali a die xiiij Maj 1646, qua a Conventu tunc recessit iturus Neapolim litigandi seu recuperandi – causa quandam Domum vigore bullarum, ac Decreti Venerandi Concilij sub die quarta Maij euisdem anni emanati illi concedentis praeogatuam residentie pro tempore quo litem prosequutus fuerit usque' ad xv diem Julij anni 1647 – qua Bononiam euis Patriam appulit cum mandato procuratorio extraordinario ad illud in Civitati hmoi [huismodi'] excedum sub die xiiij Aprilis 1646 e Cancellaria expeditum et a praemissa die xv Julij 1647 usq' ad ultimum diem Aprilis 1651 qua trienenina muneris Receptoris pro Communi Erario in Prioratu Urbis finivit et mox a prima die Maij 1652 per alios six menses deinde esquentes ad exhibendum computa per Statutum 38 de Erario Receptoribus cum residentia Conventuali concessos. Ostensis per dictum de Cagliola quibusdam licteris Agentis Religionis in Romana Curia et fris Petri Turbolo ad docendum de diligentis pro continuator litis in Civitate Neapolis ad predictam Domum Recuperanda Eminenza sacra R.D. [Reverendus Domine] Magnus Magister et Ven. Concilium cum scrutineo Suffragiorum, totum id tempus petite residentia ascendens ad annos quinque, menses quinque, et dies sexdecim ipsi Com. Orsi pro Conventuali residentia ascribendum et in Libris Ven. de Camere computorum annotandum censuerunt atque mandaverunt, sine tamen praeiudicio indicio communis erarij.

On that same day [9 July 1653], Fra Fabritio Cagliola, in his own name and on behalf of Comm. Fra Alberto Orsi, his principal, [...] to liquidate/settle for the conventual residence from 13 May 1646, when he then left on his way to Naples to litigate [or to recover] a certain house by virtue of Bulls and the Decree of the Holy Council dated 4 May of the same year, issued to him granting him the prerogative of residence for the time required when the litigation is underway. Until 15 July 1647, the day on which he arrived at Bologna his home town with an extraordinary procuratorial sanction in order to put into effect in this city under/by the date of 13 April 1646 issued from the Chancery and from the afore-mentioned day of 15 July 1647 until the last day of April 1651 when the triennial [concession] given by the Receiver of the Common Treasury in the Priory of Rome finished and soon from the 1st day of May 1652 for another six months thereafter following, for him to exhibit the accounts according to Statute 38 granted to Receivers with conventual residence. Have been presented/exhibited certain letters by the said Cagliola [...] from the Brother Agent [?ambassador] to the Roman Curia and of Fra Petrus Turbolo in order to learn about [...] for the litigation to continue in the city of Naples in order to recover that house, his Eminence the Grand Master and the Venerable Council by ballot in all that time of the requested residence amounting to five years, five months and sixteen days to Comm. Orsi, they granted and gave, for conventual residence to be noted down in the books of the Ven. Office of Accounts [...] without prejudice to the Common Treasury.



Figure 1: After Guido Reni, San Michele Arcangelo (before 1653). Oil on canvas, 311 x 215 cm. Chapel of Provence, St John's Co-Cathedral, Valletta

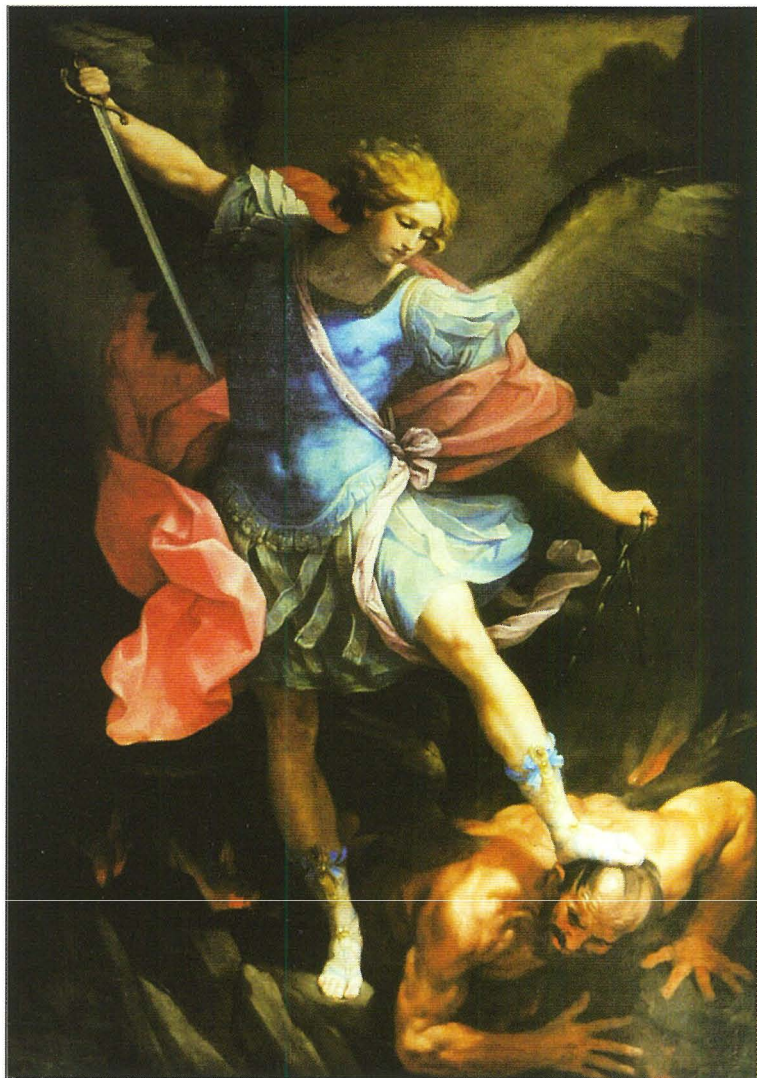


Figure 2: Guido Reni, San Michele Arcangelo (1636). Oil on silk, 293 x 202 cm Sta Maria della Concezione dei Capuccini, Rome



Figure 3: After Guido Reni, San Michele Arcangelo (1756). Mosaic, c.285 x 207 cm, Chapel of St Michael, St Peter's Basilica, Rome



Figure 4: Mattia Preti, St George and the Dragon (1659). Oil on canvas, Chapel of Aragon, St John's co-Cathedral, Valletta.

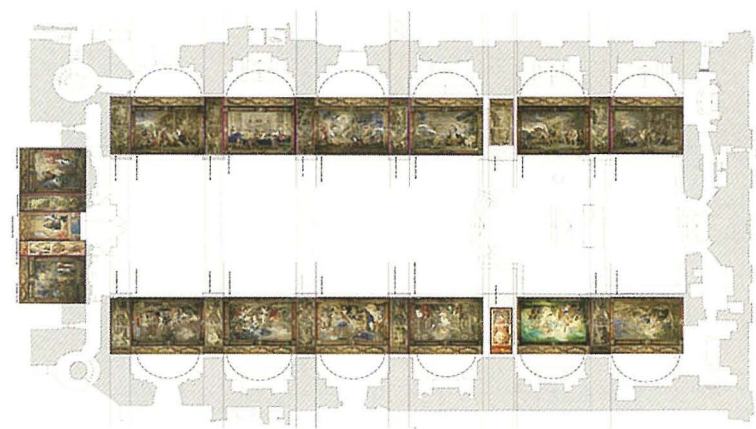


Figure 1: Plan of the church with tapestries.

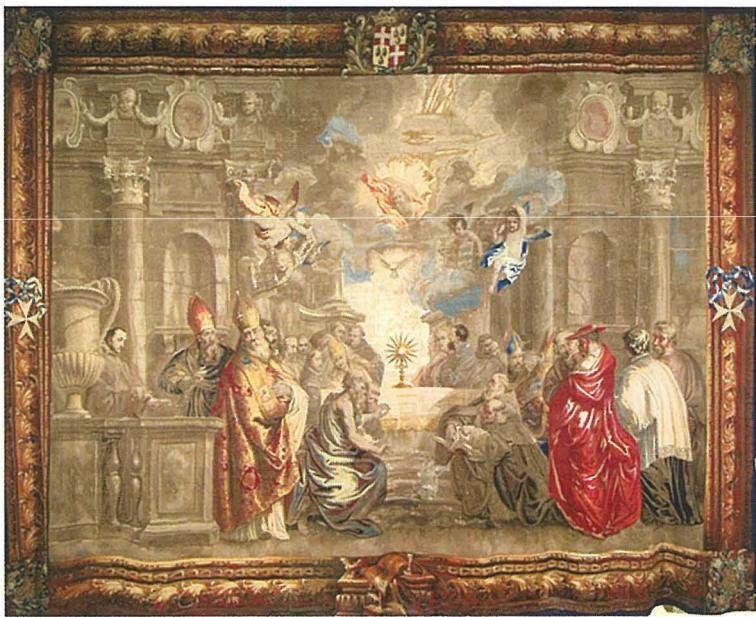


Figure 2: The Institution of the Eucharist.



Figure 3: Photograph showing the tapestries hanging in the nave.



Figure 4: View of the tapestries as they hung above the main door



Figure 5: Portrait of Grand Master Ramon y Perellos